

Feds make quick trip for SCHIP

By JENNIFER McKEE - IR State Bureau - 09/29/07 – Helena Independent Record

Federal officials from Denver flew here to meet briefly with state leaders Friday to assure them the government values a children's health insurance program for the working poor, even as President Bush is poised to veto a bill expanding it.

The visit was part of a quick push for federal health officials to meet all 50 state governors in the days before the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) is set to expire.

Joe Nunez, regional director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Mark Gilbert, regional administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid, said they flew in from Denver to personally assure Montana leaders that the federal government does not want to do away with the program and to find out what kinds of back-up plans states have in the works should the program expire.

The two flew in and out of Helena Friday, spending roughly eight hours getting to and from Montana for a meeting that lasted less than half an hour. Gilbert said he didn't know how much their airline tickets cost, but on-line airline ticket seller Orbitz.com estimated two round-trip tickets from Denver to Helena purchased during the week on short notice would cost between \$1,100 and \$1,400 per person.

Congress has passed a bill expanding the SCHIP by \$35 billion over the next five years. That bill is now sitting on the president's desk, but Bush has threatened to veto it. Without legislation to extend the current program, SCHIP will expire Monday.

"It's very important to all of us that the program continues," Gilbert said in an interview after the meeting, adding that he wanted to assure Montanans enrolled in the program that their children will still have insurance on Monday, regardless of what happens in Washington.

It is unlikely that the program would end entirely, as lawmakers have vowed to pass a bill extending it until the main sticking points surrounding CHIP can be resolved.

In Montana, the program insures 14,860 children, said Mary Dalton, who manages the program here. The insurance is paid for with a combination of state and federal dollars and covers children whose parents make too much money to qualify for federal health care for the poor, but not enough to buy private insurance on the open market.

All three members of Montana's congressional delegation have voted in favor of the expanded bill which could add another 12,000 uninsured Montana children to the rolls and Democratic Sen. Max Baucus has taken a leading roll in pushing Congress's plan.

Several of the people at Friday's 25-minute meeting said they found the gathering strange.

Anna Whiting Sorrell, Gov. Brian Schweitzer's policy adviser for families, said she was told the two federal officials were coming to give states some options on how to continue the program should the political stalemate surrounding it drag on. Instead, the two men said only that states could either limit the number of kids in the program or limit the kinds of medical care they can receive, both bad options for Montana, said John Chappius, deputy director of Montana's Department of Public Health and Human Services which oversees the program,

Chappius attended the meeting and said Montana has enough federal money in its account to continue the program for another nine months, even if any new federal funding ended.

Representatives for Baucus and Democratic Sen. Jon Tester also were at the meeting.

Whiting Sorrell told the federal officials that if they want to help states, they should urge the president to sign

Congress' bill.

"This is about Montana children," she told them. "This is extremely important to the governor."

Afterward, Whiting Sorrell said she found the meeting odd. The two came to Montana at great inconvenience and expense and offered little.

"It certainly had political overtones," she said, adding that the scant information the men offered and received could have been handled in "a series of e-mails."

Barrett Kaiser, a spokesman for Baucus, called the meeting "a dog and pony show."

"You can call that a damage control tour," he said. "It's hard to imagine how these officials can say they support SCHIP, while their boss is waiving his veto pen in the air. Max is going to keep pushing back against all of the political rhetoric and get to the point: either you support helping kids or you don't. Max does."

Tester said Bush should sign the bill "instead of threatening to deny millions of kids health insurance."

Gilbert said the two made a personal trip to Montana because they thought their reassurances would be more meaningful in person.